

Levine Pitches Casino Plan To East Bay Park Supporters

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“Bob said that for us, this is like walking into a lion’s den,” said the man who hopes to become the casino czar of Richmond.

And last Wednesday night’s meeting of Citizens for Eastshore Parks (CESP) did feature some growling and snapping, though none by Robert Cheasty, the group’s president and the “Bob” mentioned by James D. Levine.

But in the end, Levine had presented park advocates with an offer he hopes they can’t refuse: Give us your support, and we’ll give you something you want in return.

That something, he said, just might be the acquisition of more open space for parkland “within 10 miles” of the existing park, “and some of these opportunities will not be available afterwards.”

Besides, he said, “Being progressive is about doing things, not just saying them.”

The Richmond City Council picked Levine to develop the former naval refueling station at Point Molate, where he plans a billion-dollar casino-centered resort that, he promises, will herald the economic salvation of one of the Bay Area’s most troubled cities.

A former state environmental regulator turned private consultant and now reincarnated as a developer, Levine has been promising to revitalize Richmond’s struggling economy, provide jobs for its job-starved youth and build California’s greenest-ever development—a \$1.68 billion dollar project designed to lure Asian tourists, especially the bet-a-million “whales” so coveted by the gaming palaces across the Nevada border.

Levine said the plans he and the Guidivilles were proposing would fulfill Richmond’s mandate for “the one opportunity they were given to transform the economy of the city itself,” spinning off hundreds of million in new revenues and creating hundreds of new jobs for the city’s poorest youth.

But some, like Richmond activist Charles T. Smith and Carol Fall, were not convinced.

“I don’t care if it’s the greenest thing in the world,” Smith said. “The real issue here is that it’s about robbing people of their hard-earned money in that casino.”

Smith, a long-time community activist, said he and 300 others had just worked for months to create another source of revenue for the city by their successful campaign to pass Measure T in the Nov. 4 general election, imposing a new business tax he said will generate up to \$26 million in new revenues for the city, \$16 million from Chevron alone.

Smith said he was also worried because tribes possess sovereign immunity, and can simply order critics off their property “if they don’t like what you’re doing.”

“I’ve heard you do a lot of these presentations,” said Carol Fall to Levine. “You’re always telling people this is going to save Richmond, but studies always show that casinos are very detrimental to the community.”

But Levine said detrimental effects were limited to casinos that don't rely on high rollers, the clientele he and his partners are targeting.

To CESP, he was making his pitch to his staunchest opponents, environmental activists who had long hoped to transform one of the Bay Area's last relatively undeveloped stretches of urban shoreline into a park and wildlife haven.

While Levine promised them both, some skepticism was evident in questions that followed his pitch.

Twice green

In order "to create a draw strong enough to create thousands of jobs" and revive the city's economy, Levine said, "we determined that in fact if we were to create a five-star-standard resort like Pebble Beach, we would draw enough world tourism so that it would enhance the economy."

Besides the green that flows over the blackjack tables, Levine promised another kind of green, one more suited to his audience.

He promised green building technology, complete with biofuel-powered ferries, solar-roofed condos and solar-heated water, recycled rainwater and the plight of a landless and long-exploited tribe whose women had been reduced to mopping the floors and cleaning the kitchens of East Bay homeowners.

The casino would also become a mechanism for creating social justice, a vehicle for ending "150 years of despair" for a long-neglected tribe.

Deprived of recognition in 1859 in a deal in which they were promised but never paid \$254,000, the Gaidivilles sued for restoration of their tribal status in 1987, winning recognition in a settlement four years later.

And to reestablish their reservation, Levine said, "Congress gave them one mechanism, Indian gaming."

Approval of the tribe's application to have the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs take the land into trust to build a casino could come as soon as late next year, Levine said.

(Levine, like most casino advocates dating back to the founding of the Nevada Gaming Association, always uses the word "gaming" to define the business, a semantic equation of slot machines with PlayStations and Xboxes, rather than the more precise but grittier "gambling" to describe what goes on in casinos.)

The other sort of green will come, he said from payments to the city of \$450 million over 20 years to cover the costs of the site and public service mitigation costs, while the casino, hotels, shopping center and planned green condos would be churning out up to \$275 million annually in state compact fees, state and federal income taxes on new jobs and sales and real estate taxes generated by new employees.

Another set of beneficiaries, he said, would be "people who are killing each other in the Iron Triangle," young African American men "whose grandparents won World War II."

Only his project would offer them jobs, as well as support for programs like RichmondWORKS [CQ] that trained them in their new skills, he claimed.

Preservation

The casino is a preservationist's delight, restoring 34 of the 35 buildings that won the site a place on the National Register of Historic Places. The resort's 2,500-seat performance hall, "the equivalent of Zellerbach Hall" at UC Berkeley, would provide Richmond its only live entertainment venue.

The casino itself would be housed in the centerpiece of the historic district, the Winehaven Building, a stately brick edifice adorned with crenelated faux battlements that once housed the largest single wine enterprise in the state until Prohibition came along.

But while he predicted Richmond's residents would flock to the resort for entertainment, he promised the less affluent "won't gamble their milk money" because the targeted clientele for the green felt tables and the gleaming banks of slot machines are all folks who make upwards of \$100,000 a year.

For CESP and others in the environmental community, he promises 145 acres of open space, all placed in a binding conservation easement, including 55 acres of shoreline park, with protected habitat for threatened species, along with "perpetual funding for all the park and open space."

The project's budget includes \$10 million just to clear out invasive plant species and restore the site to its native habitat, Levine said.

More greening would come from a donation to the city which would fund and plant 2,000 trees a year for a decade.

There was still more greening for public transit advocates, including a plan to use empty seats on the Marin County and Vallejo ferries to transport 5,000 resort visitors a day "for no additional fuel for greenhouse gas."

Even the room keys are to be green, with the card system automatically dousing the lights when guests leave the quarters to go out to play. Much of the electricity they do burn will come from the two to three megawatts of solar power generated at the site.

Another voltage killer will be found in the casino, which unlike all but one other "gaming" spa, will be daylight—as will all other parts of the resort. Casinos typically lack both windows and clock, both reminders of the passage of time.

Even the Point Molate bedrock will assist in the greening, he said, through "a system of passive heating and cooling using rock storage."

Shuttles will transfer gamblers and other visitors to and from BART, and Levine said he has talked with AC Transit about increased service to bring Richmond residents to and from their jobs at Point Molate.

Harrah's ungreen?

Levine said, "We fired Harrah's," their earlier partner in the project, "because when we said we wanted to make this the greenest project ever" and use it to create jobs for Richmond's jobless, "they looked at us as though we were crazy."

Their new bankroll comes from another tribe, the Rumsey Band of Wintun Indians, which owns and runs the Cache Creek casino in Yolo County.

“We have a \$300 million joint venture agreement with Rumsey,” he said, and the tribe has signed onto the green agenda. The remainder of the billion dollar budget will come from construction loans which could be raised “within a month or two” once federal regulators greenlight the project.

Levine said his green vision was shared by the priests of Richmond’s two major Catholic parishes, who he said have endorsed his vision, “and the Baptist churches have endorsed—and that’s not what they teach in Sunday School.”

Levine also said he’d also won support from the East Bay Regional Parks District, “because we all felt we had more to get by working together,” with the district to be given a role in managing both the parkland on the reservation and the Bay Trail extension through the site.

“That may be overstating the case,” said another individual close to the negotiations who spoke on condition of anonymity.

And should CESP chose to negotiate for their share in the casino riches, Levine said, “I could come with a team of people, and we could come up with a whole palette of things that could be extracted.”

He didn’t get a firm rejection, but veteran park activists like Sylvia McLaughlin weren’t smiling during his presentation.

“If we didn’t have a whole lot of people like you running around opposing us, a lot of things would be possible,” said Levine. “Sorry for being so direct.”

In the end, CESP Chair Robert Cheasty appointed CESP Executive Director Patricia Dawn Smith and board member and Sierra Club attorney Norman LaForce to consider any proposal from Levine and his colleagues.

The 110 Guidivilles and their already wealthy partners at Cache Creek will be watching closely, as will Levine.

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